

BETWEEN “DESCENT INTO HELL” AND “ASCENSION TO HEAVEN”

From modern projection to the historical figure of Czech Church reformer Jan Hus

Thomas Martin Buck

“It was only after Hus was dead that his ideas truly came to life”, German historian Leopold von Ranke wrote in 1888. He was referring to the fact that the execution of Church reformer Jan Hus had such a massive impact on the history of his reception that it has become nearly impossible in our present time to distinguish between myth and historical reality. The image of Hus created by subsequent generations overlays and obscures the historical figure, and the following study illustrates that this process of narrative transformation and stylization already began shortly after Hus’ death. Examples discussed in this context are the historiographic accounts by Ulrich Richental and Peter von Mladonowitz. Both contemporary witnesses do not describe what happened “objectively”, instead painting a picture of Hus whose ambivalence and ambiguousness continues to have an effect to this day, making it difficult for historians to tell his story “the way it happened” as intended by Ranke. Hus biographer Pavel Soukup rightfully pointed out in 2014 that the historical significance of Jan Hus lies not just in the fact that he was burned and subsequently instrumentalized in various ways. According to Soukup, a person like Hus should be of interest not only because of his death but primarily for his life and work. The following text shows how challenging it is to penetrate through the imaginations and projections of posterity to the actual historical figure of the Church reformer.